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SUBJECT: Youth Flash Mobs on Rise Despite Repression

Sensitive But Unclassified; Protect Accordingly.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Flash mobs have increasingly become one of the principal methods of protest by anti-Lukashenko activists since the March presidential elections. Consequently, Belarusian authorities have steadily intensified their already significant repression of flash-mob activists. Police tactics aimed at deterring flash mobs have included surveillance of opposition buildings and websites, criminal prosecutions, and, in recent days, pre-emptive arrests. However, despite the increased repression, a growing number of opposition youth view flash mobs as an effective method to capture public attention and possibly spark wider support for democratic change. This rising enthusiasm for flash mobs among youth activists culminated in a controversial effort by supporters of former presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich to create a center for coordinating flash-mob protests. END SUMMARY.

Flash Mobs on Rise

12. (SBU) Flash-mob activities have become increasingly popular among young people since the first documented Belarusian flash mob held on August 24, 2003. [Note: Although the organizers described this flash mob as apolitical, Belarusian police still threatened to enforce Belarus' laws against unsanctioned events.] Flash mobs have occurred with even more frequency following the March presidential elections. Throughout April, flash mobs demonstrated remarkable organization and temerity. On April 16, a flash mob of more than a hundred people read from the Belarusian constitution near the BKGB building to highlight violations of the Constitution by Lukashenko's regime. On April 23, a flash mob of several hundred young people gathered on Minsk's October Square to honor protestors who participated in the tent city. The flash mob sat on the square for five minutes before departing. On April 28, prompted by internet advertisements, around 200 persons formed a flash mob on October Square and simultaneously opened copies of the independent newspaper "Nasha Niva," which they silently read as they marched to Victory Square.

GOB Ratchets Up Pressure on Flash Mobs

13. (SBU) By the end of April, the authorities stepped up their repression of flash mobs. On April 28, police arrested eight flash-mob activists outside the Belarusian Supreme Court in Minsk. Dozens of young people had come to the Court to read books of Belarusian writers to demonstrate support for the Union of Belarusian Writers, which was facing dissolution by the government.

Police released all eight a few hours later after copying their passport information.

¶4. (SBU) On May 7, a group of young activists planned a flash mob at the statue of Francisk Skarnya near the old National Library in Minsk to mark the anniversary of the renaming of Francisk Skarnya Avenue. The group reportedly intended to open history textbooks used by Belarusian schools and tear out a few pages. As the flash mob formed, riot police blocked access to the library and arrested twelve persons. Police released the activists after searching them and recording their personal data. On May 9, the anniversary of victory against Nazi Germany, police similarly dispersed a flash mob demonstrating in support of veterans. The authorities also detained a group assembled to eat ice cream. [Note: opposition sources have suggested that this group was political and was testing the police response.]

¶5. (SBU) Belarusian authorities continue to crack down on flash mobs. From May 30 to June 1, around 50 youth activists participated in hourly shifts of sitting on the pavement at Lenin Square in the western city of Brest and reading the Bible to demonstrate solidarity with several imprisoned leaders of Malady Front, an opposition youth group. Police arrested five activists. Three were found guilty of holding an unauthorized religious event under Article 167 of the Administrative Code.

¶6. (SBU) On June 2, OMON riot police seized nine activists on Yakub Kolas Square in Minsk. Authorities detained the nine for at least two hours but filed no charges. Police described the arrests as pre-emptive. [Note: This flash mob was to be held in solidarity with youth activists who were then on hunger strike.]

Opposition Coalition Tries to Bring Flash Mob Organizers Into Fold

¶7. (SBU) On May 7, supporters of former presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich announced their creation of a center for coordinating and organizing flash-mob events that would operate within the pro-democracy movement "Za Svobodu" (For Freedom). The center garnered almost immediate support from the flash-mob group "Otpor." However, most flash-mob activists were reticent or rejected overt affiliation with the established opposition political parties and NGOs. For example, on May 8, the opposition organization "Initsiativa" (Initiative) issued a statement declining participation in the coalition's flash-mob center.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: It is clear that a growing number of opposition youth find flash mobs to be an effective complement and possible catalyst for larger, more traditional forms of protest. Flash mobs only require the mobilization and coordination of a few dozen to a few hundred people and thus are less vulnerable to mass arrests by authorities. Youth activists told Econoff that police normally need 30 minutes to bring in reinforcements to arrest a crowd of people. Their goal is to protest and be gone before the police arrive. Moreover, the remarkable creativity of flash mobs and their media coverage seem to have re-energized a considerable segment of the Belarusian opposition youth movement in the wake of university expulsions and imprisonments by the GOB.

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